

SOMEBODY'S ALWAYS HUNGRY: Essays on Motherhood

By Juliet Myfanwy Johnson

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Reviewed by Julia Gibson

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Becoming a mother turns a person inside out. Your heart's in a lunchbox. Your body and time belong to someone you barely know, a parasitic thief, a rude gobbling shrieker who outwits and foils you at every turn. You forget to mind.

Juliet Johnson doesn't say much about her pre-mom life, except that her idea of what it would be like to have two small children did not turn out to resemble the universe in which she now resides. Her household is messy and loud: the TV's blaring, the kids are manhandling the pet tortoise, tearing up styrofoam cups and throwing the bits at each other, crying because they hate overalls. And she's yelling. Long ago, she never thought she'd be a yeller, and she is, a loud one who finds herself bellowing ridiculous things ("Don't hold the dog by the lips!") Worse, nobody's listening.

Johnson doesn't spend a lot of time feeling bad about the yelling or the kids sleeping in the grownup bed for years on end or the detoured career. She's not shopping for a revamp of her body, lifestyle, or parenting skills. She's not chronicling motherhood in order to amuse, send up, analyze, or offer tips. Her aim is higher, deeper, truer. Certainly one could - if one was, for instance, the mother of small children - dip into these essays and be assured and comforted that other yellers exist in other sticky kitchens, and take no more away than that. It would be plenty. Every page is a vivid, funny, poignant scene of power struggles, lost teeth, dead pets, the high drama and humdrum grind of life with kids. Yet there's more. Cleverly disguised as a collection of anecdotes by a harried new mother who might be just like someone you know, the book is a lighthearted but gutsy meditation on time, mortality and surrender.

Before the first one came along, Johnson had her preconceptions. Things would be orderly. She'd worked as a nanny, and knew what was what. She wouldn't be the kind of mother who would let the children sleep with the grownups. Then she was. Not because the babies strongarmed her, exactly. She surrendered, but not to them. This mom is no Patton, no Poppins, but she's not a pushover either. She gave in to joy. Sleeping in one big heap: joy. Spending a whole summer watching TV and swimming with the two little ones: joy. Because - guess what? They're only three for as long as it takes for the earth to make one spin. Before you know it, the state wants you to get up at an ungodly hour so your kid can be taken from you and told to sit still all day.

This is no sermon. It's a celebration, a praise song – not to kids per se, but to what they can bring to the willing disciple. Johnson's children feed her as much as she feeds them, but not sandwiches. The bargain: she keeps them from starving, and her tiny live-in professors do no less than remind her of what we grown ones have forgotten. No, she doesn't quote their zenlike utterings. She doesn't need to. They're too spiritually advanced to discuss it, anyway.

They just go about their business, and anybody who bothers to observe can learn a thing or two. How to try and try until you get it right. How to make your meaning straight and clear. To get someone to stop being mean. Bury a loved one. Dress like the dancer you know you are. Unabashedly have fun. Could anything be more sustaining?

Nothing about this book is sentimental. Family life is chaotic. Someone's always crying. Ketchup drips in the car. A toddler carries a dead rabbit to its grave. Death runs throughout the narrative, a counterpoint to the promise of the young. Old and sick ones go, new ones grow. A mother opens herself to life right here, this very moment, down in the blobs of red on the stained carpet, awash in tears and dishwater, surrendering down to the bare heart.

*Julia Gibson is a mother, a grandmother and, these days, a writer. Previously she was a Hollywood movie maker, known for her collaboration as Visual Effects Producer for director James Cameron on such films as **True Lies** and **The Abyss**.*